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AVAILABLE FROM Just for the Kids, 301 Congress, Suite 575, Austin, TX 78701-4041. Tel: 800-762-4645 (Toll-Free); Fax: 512-320-4140; e-mail: jftk@just4kids.org. For full text: <http://www.just4kids.org>.

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ABSTRACT

This booklet summarizes findings from Just for the Kids' recent examination of promising practices in Texas Schools. It focuses on those schools that served disadvantaged students yet had high performance over 3 years. The key focus of Just for the Kids is on the students. Schools break down the goals of school reform into manageable chunks, constantly reviewing individual data and examining what can be done for each child. Issues of teacher and teaching quality are critical, and the schools are very grounded in research-based instructional practices. Five strategies common to all of the high-performing schools are: take initiative, make no excuses, and strive for success; develop and execute a clear strategy for improvement; continuously assess progress and intervene immediately when students or teachers are struggling; make high-quality teaching and research-based instructional practice the top priority; and collaborate both inside and outside the schools. Descriptions of sample elementary schools are included. (SM)

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1

PROMISING



PRACTICES

HOW HIGH-LEVEL SCHOOLS
IMPLEMENT THESE PRACTICES

SCHOOLS THAT ARE
HIGH-LEVEL SCHOOLS

CONCLUSIONS



2

Just for the Kids

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Acknowledgments

This booklet summarizes findings from Just for the Kids' recent examination of promising practices in Texas schools. The research was conducted by Just for the Kids staff, and a complete version of the research report is available online at www.just4kids.org.

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*"What doesn't vary is the premise
that student achievement is not negotiable
and excuses are not accepted."*

— Just for the Kids. Promising Practices Study of High-Performing Schools



INTRODUCTION

How do successful schools do it?

Schools across the country are working to raise expectations for what students are learning and to ensure that every student reaches more rigorous standards. Why are some schools — including schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students — able to achieve more, while others are not? Just for the Kids, a nonprofit organization advocating for better schools in Texas, set out to find the answers.



Just for the Kids' vantage point is unique. Texas has been a national leader in setting academic standards and holding schools accountable for achieving results. Schools in this state have a decade-long track record of helping students from all backgrounds meet a set of clear standards. And, since 1997, Just for the Kids has regularly analyzed and published data about each school's performance. The organization is using this data to help school leaders benchmark their efforts against similar schools and to help community members learn more about best practices.

With this report, Just for the Kids pinpoints the strategies used by the most successful schools in

Texas. Remarkably, the approaches didn't vary much from school to school. And while the strategies aren't extraordinary — any school committed to improvement can pursue similar strategies — the results are.

Just for the Kids hopes these lessons can help other schools adopt a course of action that will lead to better results for students. School reform has always been a school-by-school phenomenon; success is determined by a combination of leadership in the classroom and practice in the school building. This report seeks to capture and describe this combination at the best schools in

Texas, giving other schools a blueprint to begin their own improvement efforts.

Learning From the Best

During the 1999–2000 school year, Just for the Kids sifted through test scores and identified some of the state's highest-performing schools in high-poverty areas. It contrasted these findings with a look at schools serving similar students but with average performance. The goal was to learn more about the practices and strategies that schools can use to help all students achieve.

The 17 high-performing schools in this study were "best in their class" at serving low-income and ethnic minority students. Just for the Kids looked for schools where at least half the students were from low-income families (receiving free or reduced-priced lunches) with consistently high test scores during three years. The common strategies of these high-performing schools are featured in this report.

Working Smarter to Help Kids Succeed

What Just for the Kids found was compelling: Improved student learning was the unrelenting focus. But these schools aren't just working harder; they're working smarter. They have clear and deliberate strategies in place that make them successful at achieving their goals. Educators at these improving schools don't let the "big picture" obscure what the work is really about: making sure kids learn important subject matter.

The key is a focus on the student. These schools break down the lofty goals of school reform into manageable chunks. They constantly review individual data and answer the question, "What can I do for this child?" Issues of teacher and teaching

5 Common Strategies

So how do these schools do it? Just for the Kids found five improvement strategies common to all of the high-performing schools it examined:

- 1 Take initiative: Make no excuses and strive for success.
- 2 Develop and execute a clear strategy for improvement.
- 3 Continuously assess progress and intervene immediately when students or teachers are struggling.
- 4 Make high-quality teaching and research-based instructional practice the top priority.
- 5 Collaborate, both inside and outside the school.

These five strategies help the schools organize their efforts, work smarter and make a real difference in what students are learning.

quality are critical, and the schools are very grounded in research-based instructional practices, not fad or word-of-mouth. They choose new practices or programs based only on information about student learning and new research. They fully believe that their students and their school can be as good as — or better than — any other in the state of Texas.

What We Can Learn From These Schools

As schools across the country struggle to help more students learn at high levels, these Texas success stories provide a road map for improvement efforts.

Policymakers and school district leaders should consider these findings as they design

accountability systems that seek to give schools the information and resources they need to be successful.

Educators can use this information to craft their own improvement plans.

Parents and community members should use these findings to ask questions about and advocate for practices that can lead to success at their neighborhood schools.

Finally, what we see in these findings is that poverty doesn't need to be an insurmountable

obstacle to high achievement. In fact, high expectations for performance — coupled with a relentless focus on student learning and teaching quality — are key. Student achievement is not negotiable, and excuses for failure are not accepted. These schools have an accountability mindset, and they believe that all kids, regardless of their circumstances, can learn. *And they're proving it.*

Research Design

How these schools were selected

Just for the Kids — with support from the Meadows Foundation and the Jerry Junkins Memorial Fund — combed its database of school performance in Texas and finally selected 32 schools for this study, 17 high-performing schools and 15 average performers.

To begin its research, Just for the Kids identified the highest-performing elementary schools in the state over time. It further analyzed the data to determine if a school's student achievement was improving or declining and at what grade levels high performance was occurring. Schools with less than 10 continuously enrolled students in any grade were excluded.

From that list of high-performing schools, Just for the Kids selected 54 schools that represented a cross-section of geographic and ethnic

diversity. Only schools with 50 percent or greater economically disadvantaged student populations (students qualifying for the free or reduced-price lunch program) were considered. Initially, most of the schools on the list were in south or west

Only schools with 50 percent or greater economically disadvantaged student populations were considered.

Texas. To regionally balance the choice of schools and to adequately represent schools serving African-American students, Just for the Kids ran a second list of the highest-performing schools with

predominantly African-American student bodies.

This study does not highlight the highest-performing schools in the state overall; it focuses instead on those schools that served disadvantaged students and yet had high performance during the past three years.

A complete copy of the study is available online at www.just4kids.org.

Take initiative: Make no excuses and strive for success

High-performing schools place students and student achievement first, and they don't make excuses. These schools have a driven principal and a committed team of faculty leaders — individuals who set the tone for the school's work and ensure the other four improvement strategies are implemented.



How High-Performing Schools Did It

Student performance goals are based on a higher standard than simply passing the state exam, and multiple performance measures are used to constantly gauge student progress.

Leadership is critical. Principals spend most of their time on instructional issues: observing teachers, monitoring teacher performance and student achievement, researching potential programs, and teaching demonstration lessons. They are instructional leaders, participating in — and often leading — schoolwide staff development sessions.

Principals regularly confer with teachers to discuss each student's achievement and how instructional practices in their classrooms are impacting achievement. Students don't fall through the cracks. Successful principals know the status of individual students, particularly those who are struggling in key subject areas — and teachers know they know.

"If a child doesn't get it, it's your job as a teacher to demonstrate to me that you are going to change that situation. You have to sit down and make the change. It's about the learner and about teaching — not about the teacher."

— Anne McClellan, principal, Poe Elementary

Develop and execute a clear strategy for improvement

High-performing schools agree on a plan that provides a common mission and purpose for the work of the school. This plan spells out a building-wide course of action — what the school intends to accomplish and what steps it will take to succeed. Everything that happens in the school — how time is spent, teachers are trained and resources are allocated — supports the plan.



How High-Performing Schools Did It

Improving schools develop grade-by-grade standards that help the school identify instructional priorities and clearly define what teachers should be teaching. Based on these standards, the school sets academic goals in specific subject areas, such as kindergarten through second-grade reading or third-grade mathematics.

Promising practices, informed by empirical research, drive the selection of programs and strategies. Faculty members make sure a program will be effective by reviewing student achievement data from other schools, examining instructional practices and published programs with proven track records, and visiting schools with similar demographics that have implemented that program.

The schools have created a unified and common curriculum for the entire building, divided curriculum into manageable components, and aligned curriculum with teaching materials and assessment instruments. Since one size doesn't fit all, schools analyze their instructional programs and supplement them to ensure that a balanced curriculum is being taught in reading, writing and mathematics.

Building administrators, instructional specialists and master teachers give faculty members constant feedback on teaching methods. Student performance and the effectiveness of teaching methods are discussed widely.

The school day or school year is restructured at many of these schools to give teachers the extra time they need to plan together, discuss student progress and reflect on best practices. For example, one school releases students early on Fridays to give teachers time to meet.

Teachers are given the materials, training and support they need to meet schoolwide goals. If needed, principals seek out additional resources — both cash grants and support from businesses and the community — to support school priorities and fund instructional initiatives.

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Worsham Elementary

"Anyone can do what we've done"

Some would say the staff at Worsham Elementary faces stiff odds.

With more than 87 percent receiving free or reduced-price lunches, students come to school facing a variety of challenges. But that's not the way Worsham's staff sees things. "You hear teachers talking about what children can do, not what they can't do," explains Principal Holly Fisackerly. "If a child has a problem, we problem solve. There are no excuses."

The school staff's commitment to — and enthusiasm for — student learning shows up in its test scores (see chart). Despite its obstacles, Worsham ranks as one of the highest-performing elementary schools in Texas in both reading and math.

The most important ingredient in Worsham's success, says Fisackerly, is this: "It's all in the expectation. Any school can accomplish what we've accomplished. You have to believe you can get it done."

The starting point is attitude. Worsham's staff believes students can learn, and teachers do everything they can to make sure it happens. Their efforts are relentless. "We don't lose a minute of instructional time. We're here to teach," says Fisackerly. She notes that other schools may spend 10 or 15 minutes a day in passing time or making announcements, which adds up to a significant amount of time during the 185-day school year. Meanwhile, at Worsham, students may find themselves doing math cards and drills while standing in line between classes.

"It's all in the expectation. Any school can accomplish what we've accomplished. You have to believe you can get it done."

— Holly Fisackerly, principal, Worsham Elementary

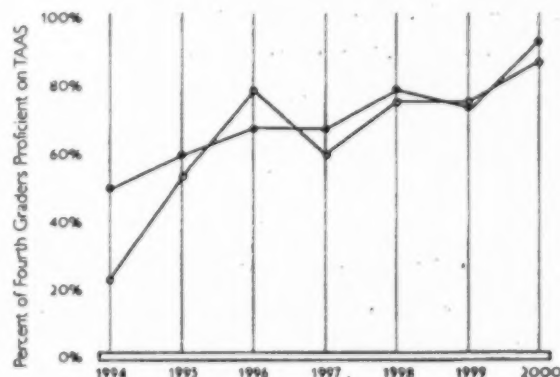
The nuts and bolts of Worsham's strategies mirror the other successful schools cited in this report: a commitment to high-quality teaching, good use of data and collaboration. For example, Fisackerly meets with teachers every week. "We look at data very carefully. We celebrate, and we problem solve," she says. "We develop a plan to make a weakness a strength. We ask, 'Why is this happening across the grade level? What is it we need to get done? What support or training do

you need?'" As principal, Fisackerly makes it her business to support and lead efforts to improve instruction.

Despite the continuous drive for improvement, teachers don't burn out and leave the school. Part of the reason is that teachers are working smarter, not simply harder. And part of it, according to Fisackerly, is that "teachers love being successful."

Worsham Math and Reading Scores Soar

● Grade 4 Reading Scores ○ Grade 4 Mathematics Scores



Worsham Elementary enrolls students in kindergarten through fourth grade. Its student population is 87.5 percent low income and 51.1 percent limited English proficient. Worsham is in the Aldine Independent School District.

Continuously assess progress and intervene immediately when students or teachers are struggling

It's a common mantra that "what gets inspected gets respected." Data and assessment inform what happens in these schools, from choosing instructional priorities each year to evaluating the effectiveness of professional development programs to helping teachers improve their teaching. Because they use multiple and frequent measures of student achievement, teachers can pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of each child, review progress regularly with other teachers and the principal, and intervene when a student is struggling.



How High-Performing Schools Did It

Assessment isn't one shot or random. Tests and classroom assessments are chosen carefully, and student progress in core curriculum areas is checked daily, weekly and monthly. Teachers use multiple assessment tools, both formal and informal, to assess individual student learning of Texas' state standards.

In kindergarten through second grade, schools take full advantage of the information provided by the Texas-developed Primary Reading Inventory (which is used by the state before standardized assessment begins in third grade). The assessment is administered to one student at a time, and teachers use the diagnostic information it provides to pinpoint the reading abilities of individual students.

The principal, teacher and instructional specialists discuss the results of each student assessment and the progress of individual students.

Instructional targets are set for all students — not just those failing to meet school or state standards.

Teachers provide immediate intervention for students based on daily, weekly or monthly reviews of student progress.

To support students who are struggling academically, these improving schools provide specific personnel and programs, including tutorial assistance during the school day and extended-day or extended-year programs.

Teacher performance data are analyzed along with student achievement data, and teachers are held accountable for individual student performance. Immediate intervention is available for teachers struggling with instructional concepts or classroom management. All teachers are expected to meet the rigorous demands of the instructional program.

Make high-quality teaching and research-based instructional practice the top priority

High-performing schools invest in their teachers, helping them deepen both their content knowledge and teaching skills. They are focused clearly on teacher and teaching quality. These schools select their own professional development opportunities for teachers to reinforce the school's instructional priorities. These efforts are based on scientific research about what helps students learn, not on fad or fashion, and student assessment data help gauge their effectiveness. Workshops, peer coaching, and time for planning and reflection all help build instructional capacity in core subject areas at each grade level.



How High-Performing Schools Did It

Professional development happens in the school's instructional priority areas, and staff training becomes the strategy for achieving the school's goals. Instructional specialists are hired to work with teachers to ensure that new teaching strategies are being implemented effectively in the classrooms. These specialists observe teachers in the classroom to provide immediate assistance and feedback.

Many high-performing schools modify the school day or calendar to provide time for staff development. One school, for example, allocates three days each month for faculty members to meet for training.

Teachers who attend off-campus workshops or conferences are expected to share the strategies they have learned with other staff members, and implementation is discussed at grade-level and faculty meetings.

Teachers new to the school or new to a grade level are paired with master teachers who provide support with lesson planning, instructional delivery, and campus programs and procedures.

Master teachers or additional instructional specialists also are deployed to support classroom teachers, help them improve their skills and provide extra assistance to struggling students.

Teachers provide individualized instruction to each student, learning how to flexibly group students at the same skill level so they can master the material and move ahead. Students are regrouped as children progress or experience difficulty.

Roosevelt Elementary

A focus on solutions, not excuses

For Charlotte Parker, the principal of Roosevelt Elementary in Houston, there's no secret to helping students achieve: "You can increase time on task. You can increase the quality of teaching. You can increase the motivation of students. At Roosevelt, we do all three."

And Roosevelt does them with great success: In a neighborhood where 84 percent of students come from low-income families, the school helps 90 percent or more of its students score at the proficient level on the fifth-grade state tests in reading and mathematics.

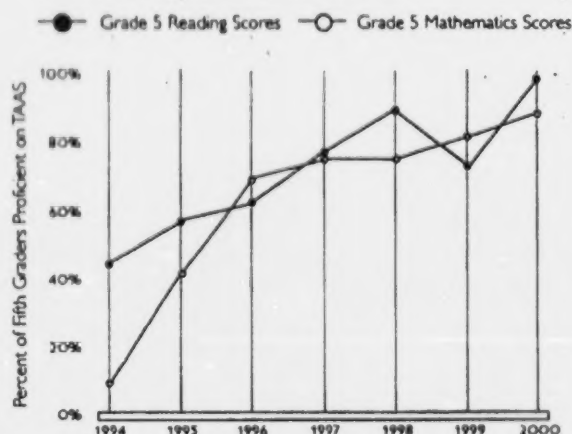
"We have an accountability to make a difference in these kids' lives. Otherwise we have no right to take taxpayer dollars," explains Parker. "We cannot leave children behind or blame children for the things adults aren't doing. My school has the same problems as any other urban school. But we're willing to do what it takes to educate these children. We focus on solutions."

Roosevelt's solutions begin with a clear instructional strategy for the school and a clear plan for every child. "We use assessment to determine very early where kids are, especially in reading," explains Parker. "We identify kids that need intensive care." Extra assistance for those who are struggling in reading, for example, includes one-on-one tutorials during the school day, reading in small groups with a specially trained reading teacher and an after-school session three days a week. In other words, students who need more learning time get more time.

Roosevelt's faculty also gives attention to instructional quality. Teachers use only research-based strategies with a track record of success. And Parker spends her time in the classroom — "not in an ivory tower," she says. "I know what is happening in each classroom." She demonstrates good teaching practices, meets with grade-level faculty each week and goes out to observe other schools that are successful. Parker also makes sure the school has rich teaching materials and resources, including lots of children's literature.

"People want you to point out one single thing they can do to improve. It's not like that. There are no miracle cures and no holy water," reflects Parker. "It's having a plan, implementing the plan, making people accountable for what they do and not making excuses."

Roosevelt Fifth Graders Excel in Reading and Mathematics



Roosevelt Elementary enrolls students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Its student population is 84 percent low income and 39.9 percent limited English proficient. Roosevelt is in the Houston Independent School District.

Collaborate, both inside and outside the school

Teachers coordinate with each other across subject areas and grade levels, making sure students are learning what they need to as they progress. They have a common mission and common vocabulary that teachers use across grade levels. The result is a schoolwide team, not a collection of individuals working independently. Just for the Kids also found that the outside support, direction and motivation schools receive from their district administrators can make an enormous difference in what they accomplish.



How High-Performing Schools Did It

Teachers work together as a problem-solving team in weekly grade-level meetings. Teachers also meet informally on a daily basis. Many high-performing schools schedule a common planning time for teachers within a grade level. This planning time is a chance for teachers to coordinate their efforts, discuss individual student progress and identify effective instructional practices.

Content-area teachers aren't the only ones focused on student achievement. Physical education and arts teachers pitch in too, and other teachers reinforce reading, writing and mathematics goals in their classrooms.

Several times each year, teachers meet in subject-area groups — across all grade levels — to plan, collaborate and receive further training. For example, kindergarten, first-grade and second-grade teachers clearly understand they contribute to the success of third- and fourth-grade students.

"I have a vision of excellence. The alternative is to accept mediocrity."

— Charlotte Parker, principal, Roosevelt Elementary

School Improvement in Texas

Texas Assessment of Academic Skills

The cornerstone of Texas' school accountability system is the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). TAAS is based on a statewide curriculum that specifies the skills and knowledge students should gain in each subject area. Since 1994, TAAS annually has measured reading and mathematics performance of students in third through eighth grades and 10th grade and writing performance in fourth, eighth and 10th grades. In addition, at the high school level, the state administers end-of-course exams in algebra, biology, English and U.S. history. Students must pass the 10th-grade TAAS test to receive a high school diploma.

More than 78 percent of all students passed all TAAS exams in 1999, compared to 55 percent in 1994. TAAS results are reported broadly as part of the Texas school accountability system, and — importantly — scores are presented for all students as well as for major socioeconomic groups. Special education students and Spanish-speaking students now are required to take TAAS exams.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only nationwide assessment of student performance, also shows a record of Texas success. On NAEP's eighth-grade writing exam, for example, Texas' overall scores ranked its students fourth nationally, and results by individual minority groups were impressive. Scores for African-American students led the nation, and scores for Hispanic students ranked second.

"A child's self-esteem and success at learning are determined by his having an opportunity to be taught at the rate and level that he is capable of being taught."

— Thaddeus Lott, former principal, Wesley Elementary

Just for the Kids

Just for the Kids, a nonprofit organization based in Austin, has worked since 1995 to motivate Texas educators and the public to raise standards and take action to improve schools. Just for the Kids gives them clear and accurate data about a school's academic condition.

Just for the Kids' unique contribution to school improvement is its exhaustive data about school performance and student demographics. Its Web site charts information about the performance and success of elementary and middle schools (and, beginning later in 2001, high schools). But — most importantly — Just for the Kids takes the data to another level, comparing the performance of each school with other schools serving equally or more challenging student populations. The idea is simple: Help schools improve by showing them how comparable schools have reached much higher levels of achievement.

To support these efforts, Just for the Kids trains educators and the public to use data, trains school leadership teams in educational best practice, and encourages public involvement in improving public schools.

Just for the Kids also has begun working with interested leaders in other states to design similar data-analysis systems that can track progress in other states.

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Education Commission of the States

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965 to help state leaders identify, develop and implement public policy for education that addresses current and future needs of a learning society. The ECS office is located in Denver, Colo.



Just for the Kids

411 Chicago Ave. Suite 575
New York, NY 10017-4111
Tel: (212) 762-4645
Fax: (212) 371-4141
http://www.jfkids.com

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